

## Quarantine Concerts: One flutist's journey to finding her place in the midst of a pandemic

*By Anna Meyer*

I'm in a meeting with my staff at 2:05 on a Wednesday afternoon. We are going over the final details for one of the most important concerts happening at our site in two days: the commissioning concert. We managed to craft an entire concert of commissioned works written just for our middle-schoolers – for free. This was going to be the concert that would instill pride in our students, our program, our organization. This was my baby. Then my phone rang.

And the next day I am in quarantine, my concert is canceled, and the city spins into chaos as we struggle to flatten the curve and wander around unknowingly inside our houses.

I had been joking with my husband and some of our colleagues at the University that week about how we were going to start a concert series called Quarantine Concerts where we would play from our homes for each other, and “wouldn't that be fun.” We would laugh. Now it's real.

Three days later, Saturday, after the defeat of the canceled concert looking at the two weeks ahead of us in quarantine (if only we knew then what we know now), we performed our first live concert. We are relaxed and light-hearted. J.S. Bach's solo Partita and a Beethoven Piano Sonata. We don't say anything, we are nervous on camera. Just play and turn off the video. Playing live online is a weird experience, I found. You know there must be someone out there, but you can't see them. All you see is that round camera eye. Is anyone watching? Messages of encouragement start to pour in as family and friends happened to catch our concert. Encouraged, we move on to day two. Temple University News picks up on our concerts and writes an article about the series. Used to performing in fancy dress under hot lights with faces smiling back at us, here we are in our studio or our living room, in our everyday clothes. There's a humanness to the casualness of the concerts. Friends and family members, people alone at home are watching our concerts and feeling less alone. Our video gets several hundred views. We can do this; we only have to make it two weeks.

Schools are closed for an additional two weeks. Now I start to panic. I notice that some people are waiting for the concerts daily and certain people are there every single day. We can't stop now. I start to see other friends and colleagues are performing and posting their concerts online as well. Music, art, starts to become a real necessity for us as we are each tucked away inside our own spaces. I realize how lucky I am to be able to continue making music, and in some ways, it's my duty to reach out and give that to other people.

Schools are closed indefinitely. We are in this for the long haul. I start to entertain thoughts of “What day is a good day to stop?” How many concerts do we perform before we say, “that's a good number, let's stop there?” When will we run out of repertoire?

My husband is an organist by training and a very good pianist. We have a grand piano in our house as well as a “small” pipe organ. Flute and organ is what we do, however, the organ we have in our house is the public transit bus of organs. It's a charming instrument, but it's not a chamber instrument. It has one manual and a very small selection of stops or sounds that my husband can choose to use for color. He is usually the master of sound at an organ console. His registrations are sensitive, beautiful, and always

just right. On concert Day 6, I suggest doing Kile Smith's *A Child's Afternoon* for our concert. He thinks for a moment and agrees. The opening of the first movement invokes a child resigned to playing alone in the absence of a playmate. It's delicate and soft at the beginning, starting with the solo flute, joined on the chordal suspension by the organ. He came in like a public transit bus. We both winced inside and couldn't help but chuckle afterwards, because this is what we have today, this is where we are as artists. While the luxury car organ sits on stage at the Kimmel Center downtown, we have the house organ. And on this, the house organ, our online audience loved it. It is our living room, we are not wearing shoes, we are simply people.

This idea of just being people becomes more and more real to us as we get deeper into the quarantine. We start to ration our food, our resources, our repertoire. "Let's just play one piece today. No reason to waste two good pieces on one day," my husband suggests. We start talking to our audience on camera. We can't see them, but they are looking at us. I have to learn to look at the camera directly and not out the window. Some of our listeners write to thank us for speaking to them. They enjoy the music, but they enjoy learning about it, about what it means to us, about why we chose it for that day or about why we chose to put the pieces together when we do more than one. They are enjoying that we are humans too.

From day one, my husband and I made a conscious decision to do all these concerts live. We wanted to make a sort of record of who we are as musicians daily. It has been several weeks now, and I start to see professional groups posting polished performances of really high-level playing. I know I am capable of a high level of playing. I am a professional. I begin to question myself and to doubt. What have I started? How long can I sustain this? What will my colleagues think of me if they go and watch these videos? I struggle with feelings of anxiety and panic over the judgement that could come down on me for being real in my space. What if a potential employer browses these videos and hears the mistakes and the under-rehearsed ensemble that is the result of performing live every day? What does this do for our online image? Is this the right career move?

And then we receive a card in the mail from a friend who has been watching every day. The card simply says, "I'm enjoying my season tickets. Thank you!" A large bill falls out of the card. I stand there speechless, realizing that this is what matters. In the midst of a global crisis, I can go to my music shelf, pull out a piece of music and bring joy to a woman hundreds of miles away.

Our concerts are far from perfect. We make mistakes; lots of them. We have jobs and kids with school work that needs to be monitored. Zoom becomes a list of meetings on the chalk board so we can make sure no one misses something. One day there were eight meetings in nine hours between the four of us. There is no time to rehearse. We end the day exhausted from the grueling task of teaching online, nurturing our kids, and the anxiety of an ever-growing global crisis. So far, we have enough repertoire, that we can just pull something and play it. We can do a pretty good job, and our audience will appreciate it. I'm learning how grateful I am for the time I spent practicing well, so that much of this repertoire I haven't played in years comes right back to me. My husband is the hero. Much of what he performs as collaborator he reads for the first time live on the concert. This is where we are. There is no time to rehearse.

Over the course of time, I begin to ask myself – for whom do I play these concerts? Isn't it for the people on the other side of the camera? Are they really going to keep watching? Or has this journey been for me? Was its purpose to bring light and hope to people who are having a harder time with the

quarantine, or is it for me to learn how to be more adaptable, how to be spontaneous, how to push myself to a higher, more intense, more rigorous, more in-the-moment standard of playing? After an eight-hour workday, can I pick up my flute and play a beautiful phrase? Can I connect to my audience when I am worn out and broken after having to separate my fighting children?

We as performers are taught not to let the audience get too close. We can invite them into our expression, our sound, our interpretation, but the audience's place is in their seats, not the dressing room. Once we step on the stage, our job is to create beauty, and the audience expects it.

But this is not how a quarantine works. We are all broken and vulnerable. We are anxious. We are isolated. We avoid the human contact we so very much crave. And so why, in this time of vulnerability when we have all been leveled would I not want to share myself with my audience? In a sense this is the best time. I am here too. I am a musician. I am a human.

Tomorrow we will perform our fiftieth concert. I thought perhaps we would stop at day 50. But somehow we made it to another weekend, wherein I will spend time pulling music off the shelf for the upcoming week. I'm running out of options, so now I have to pull less familiar repertoire, which requires more practicing. But I will keep going. I will play, because they want to listen.